DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 183 346 RC 011 908

AUTHOR Obrecht, Karl A.
TITLE Rural Townships in Minnesota: Focus on the Southwest.
INSTITUTION Southwest State Univ., Marshall, Minn.
SPONS AGENCY Minnesota Association of Township Officers, Marshall.; Minnesota State Coll. System, Marshall.; Southwest Minnesota Coll. Foundation, Marshall.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 43p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Citizen Participation; *Community Control; Delivery Systems; Financial Support; *Futures (of Society); *Governing Boards; Income; Institutional Autonomy; *Local Government; Regional Programs; *Rural Areas; Surveys; Tax Allocation
IDENTIFIERS *Minnesota; Municipal Annexation

ABSTRACT

The history, current issues and future potential of rural township government today were the central focus of a 1972 survey of 18 townships in 6 southwestern Minnesota counties. Survey methodology included personal interviews with both residents and township officers, mailed questionnaires, and attendance at board meetings of the Minnesota Association of Township Officers as well as at other types of community meetings. Rural residents were found to hold very positive attitudes toward their local governments, but they were afraid of outside forces and powers that were threatening to discontinue or limit their powers. Annexation was the paramount concern, voiced in terms of the need for area residents to be able to override outside decisions concerning annexation, and the fear of the added tax burden imposed by municipal annexation. Second only to annexation was residents' desire to retain local assessors for tax assessment. Rural township residents were very concerned about the preservation of local initiative, especially when environmental regulations, safety regulations, and development plans indicated disregard for the concerns and life styles of area residents. Other concerns involved service delivery systems, alternative revenue systems, and statewide organization activities. The final portion of this report deals with planning for the future of Minnesota's township governments through the use of regional commissions. (DS)

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Rural Townships in Minnesota:

Focus on the Southwest

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RURAL TOWNSHIPS IN MINNESOTA:

FOCUS ON THE SOUTHWEST

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Township Study

1972

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PREFACE

The study of township government the past nine months has been very rewarding personally to me. My own knowledge of rural society and its problems has deepened because of closer contact with rural township officers. Their vision of rural America is one seldom heard beyond the confines of their own homes, town meetings and protest gatherings. In the hope of a wider forum for their ideas and dreams, this report is dedicated to the members of the Minnesota Association of Township Officers.

I wish to acknowledge the work, energy and creativity of the SMSC students who worked on this study. They gave of their time and talent and without them, the study could not have been generated. My appreciation is given to Joni Ross, Kathy Froemming, John Dose, Mary Pat Booth, Russell Guy and Mike Dettling. Also, for her usual fine talents as editor and typist, I would like to thank my wife, Judy Obrecht. A special thanks goes to all the people who agreed to talk with the student interviewers, to answer the mail questionnaires, and organize meetings which left me with a profound feeling of their concern about conditions in rural society.

The study was jointly funded by the Innovative Monies Program II, Minnesota State College System and the Minnesota Association of Township Officers through the Southwest Minnesota College Foundation.

Everyone who has studied townships in the past forty years has agreed that they are essentially moribund and should be eliminated.

The 50 States and Their Local Governments, James W. Fessler, p. 250

INTRODUCTION

This report is the final report of the Study of Township Government conducted the past year by myself and students of Southwest State College. It is intended as a general outline of the history, current issues, and future potential of rural township government today. It is hoped that this report can be of help and benefit in learning situations concerned with problems faced by local governmental units. It would seem to be especially helpful for high school classes, college classes, and adult study groups.

The study involved a personal survey of 9 townships in 3 southwestern Minnesota counties conducted during the summer of 1972. The personal survey covered 118 residents and 33 township officers. In the fall of 1972, another group of 9 township in 3 different counties was surveyed by mail. (see Table 1) In this survey, half of all residents were contacted; about 18 percent responded. In actual numbers, 69 resident forms and 21 town officer forms were received. The townships were chosen by a random process but the residents and officers that responded represent an arbitrary grouping so the responses cannot be considered representative in a statistically valid basis. Table 2 gives some data on the respondents to help assess how representative the respondents were.

In addition to the surveys, board meetings of the Minnesota Association of Township Officers (MATO) were attended as were other meetings dealing

TABLE I

COUNTIES AND TOWNSHIPS SURVEYED IN STUDY

PERSONAL SURVEY

County	Township
Redwood	Morgan Lamberton Brookville
Lincoln	Hope Lake Story Limestone
Martin	Galena Jay Pleasant Prairie

MAIL SURVEY

County	Township
Kandiyohi	Mamre Whitefield Gennesco
Rock	Mound Rose Dell Martin
Yellow Medicine	Wood Lake Norman Hammer

TABLE II

BACKGROUND DATA FROM SIXTY OF THE STUDY RESPONDENTS TO THE MAIL SURVEY

Category	Number of Respondents
Age:	
elderly (over 65)	9
middle (35-65)	46
young (under 35)	5
Size of farm (acres):	
under 160	7
240	11
280	11
320	2
360	11
400	2
over 400	6
(range--80-1200)	
Education:	
under 8 years	6
8-11 years	21
High school	23
some college	8
college graduate	2
Income (yearly net before taxes):	
under $5,000	14
$5,001-$9,999	26
$10,000-$19,999	17
over $20,000	3

with special concerns, such as taxation. Township officers from areas other than the southwestern part of the state were contacted through meeting and talking with members of the MATO statewide board of directors. These contacts developed an awareness of the diversity as well as the similarity of problems faced by Minnesota townships.

It is my opinion that the value of this study is in its attempt to verbalize the existing concerns of rural residents and to articulate some alternative avenues for structuring solutions or approaches to these urgent concerns. Townships do exist, have a self interest, and may have very strong self justification. If this is in fact true, they have not been included very often in the forums of public debate or public planning. It took a battle for townships to receive reasonable participation on regional commissions, and it may take another battle before such projects as the Minnesota Experimental City involve adequately local people in grandiose projects which, if realized, would alter their lives dramatically and completely.

Rural people have ideas, attitudes, and concerns but those living in rural townships have seldom been asked to express them. In the history of this state, I have not been able to find one shred of research or material pertaining specifically to rural townships. What little material that does exist on townships is purely elementary description, unsubstantiated opinion, or relates to the problems of more populated urban fringe townships.

The following report does not pretend to present any final or complete picture. It is a beginning attempt to present a case from the side of the township. Admittedly, this case may be biased, it may be opinionated, and it

may not always be founded realistically on fact but neither has been the case so easily presented against township government. The report should raise some real questions in the mind of the reader and he or she must come to a decision. This is its purpose.

> The going rate for service on town board, road commission or equalization board--one dollar per day.
>
> 1877 Town Board Record

PART I: PAST ORIGINS

Townships as they exist in rural Minnesota today are based on the defining of congressional townships under the Northwest Ordinance. A congressional township was a six mile square land survey and had no governmental purpose. However, under the laws of Minnesota--

> Whenever a majority of the legal voters of any congressional township containing not less than twenty-five legal voters petition the county board to be organized as a town, such board shall forthwith proceed to fix and determine the boundaries of such new town and name the same...

In the years after Minnesota became a state in the 1850's, townships formed; many of those in southwestern Minnesota came into existence in the 1870's.

> In 1858 the state legislature, consulting the laws of several states, established a basic plan of town government which is still in use today...The town was devised mainly to fulfill four functions: 1) law enforcement and judicial administration; 2) road maintenance; 3) poor relief; and 4) property assessment. In Minnesota, towns now have the additional functions of weed control, fire protection, establishment and maintenance of cemetaries, establishment and maintenance of public parks, power to vote money to aid in construction of community halls erected by farm bureaus, and power to regulate animals.
>
> "The Town in an Urbanizing Area", Master's Thesis, Eileen Mary Baumgartner, University of Minnesota, pg. 8-9.

These duties were to be administered by a town board composed of three supervisors (one would be the chairman), town clerk, and treasurer. All of these positions are elective offices with supervisors serving on a three year rotation basis (one up for election each year) and the others on a straight two year term. If constables or justices of the peace are to exist,

they also are elected. The post of township assessor is appointive and under the jurisdiction of the town board. At a minimum there is a township meeting yearly in order to conduct the necessary election of officers for the next year. This meeting is held in March.

During the growth years of Minnesota agriculture and industry, the township units were the basic service providing mechanism for roads, bridges, welfare administration, and law enforcement. Incorporated municipalities existed in four to six mile spacings along the railroad lines and the villages and townships together made up the constituencies of rural counties with administration from a central county seat. Historically, many battles were fought over the location of particular county seats.

The early townships operated on a decentralized, local basis. Roads were maintained by a unique rural system of donation of one day's labor by male residents of the township (or later by paying an amount equal to a day's labor). Welfare was a local program with local input and possible support in a situation of family financial difficulty or tragedy. Issues concerning placement of roads and building of bridges were discussed at meetings over coffee and decisions were delayed many times until internal squabbles could be worked out. Township records reveal a true picture of people working out their own problems and dealing with matters within their control with economy and deliberate sense.

By the 1920's and 1930's, the advent of the automobile and the truck (later electricity) brought rural society into the midst of new technological and governmental change. The center of regulation and taxing and administrative

power began to shift more each year to statewide, bureaucratic structures in replacement of the decentralized, local township and village control. State welfare, state law enforcement and state highway systems emerged and were administered usually on a county basis. Because of this trend, township government felt itself threatened in Minnesota and elsewhere.

In 1933 a bill was introduced in the Iowa legislature to abolish township government. It didn't pass but it did prompt the formation of a South Central Minnesota Association of Township Officers which evolved into the present Minnesota Association of Township Officers. In 1939 a second association was formed in north central Minnesota. At their first annual meeting in Fergus Falls, James S. Eriksson, mayor, stated succinctly the purpose of such an organization.

> The work which rightfully belongs to this association is, then, to weld the towns into a compact organization for the protection and advancement of home rule, realizing an economical government without sacrificing any of the essential services rightfully expected by the individual citizen from his government and to assist the town boards in solving administrative problems by exchanging successful experiences.

The war years intervened and then the post war prosperity and development of the 1950's and early 1960's. Once again by the late sixties technological and governmental changes were creating new and challenging problems for township government. A Regional Development Act was passed in the state of Minnesota in 1969. The pressing concern over environmental and recreational land use was emerging. Urban and major four-lane highway programs were making ever greater demands on the tax dollar. Once again alternatives relating to the future of township government became real concerns for township officials and township residents. As in the 1930's, the response was one of strengthened statewide organization.

In 1969 MATO collected only 29 percent of its potential dues but by 1972 it realized a collection percentage exceeding 90 percent. During this period a permanent executive secretary was hired and performed effectively in pursuing the interests of township government. A successful legislative campaign in 1972 saw the amending of the Regional Development Act to include a township representative from each county as a regional commission member. A form of government supported by one day's labor time by its male residents now became an integral part of the functioning of regional commissions operating in the state. A form of government outmoded supposedly in 1920 retained its existence and showed renewed vitality in 1972, fifty-two years later. The full history of township government can't be written yet; it has a lot of life left.

PART II: PRESENT CONDITION

Presently, Minnesota with 1802 townships leads the nation in the number of townships. The townships encompass most areas of the state with some far northern regions still without organized townships. Some townships have more than two thousand residents and millions of dollars of assessed valuation while others serve only a few hundred people on property valued in five figures. Major economic pursuits vary from mining and rural industry to grain farming to dairy farming to cattle feeding to suburban residential services to resort and recreation services.

However, whatever form a township may take, it faces a situation of crisis, a threat of its discontinuance or limiting of its powers. This is the situation as perceived by many of Minnesota's township residents and officials. At meeting after meeting questions from township people reflect their real fear that township government's very existence is threatened. Why do township residents express such concern?

The most evident conclusion to be drawn from the study of rural townships is that the people served consider their form of local government to be a good one. This study covered eighteen townships in six southwestern Minnesota counties and the evidence generated supports the thesis that rural residents hold a very positive attitude toward their township board and local participation. These findings support those of Professor J. P. Henrickson, Chairman, Department of Political Science, South Dakota State University. In the late sixties, Professor Henrickson and a team of students conducted a survey of township residents in east central South Dakota. The preliminary hypothesis was that

rural people would be estranged from their local leadership. In fact, they found that the people were very happy with the township form of government and that they had a strong faith in and working relationship with their local township officials. Tragically, all of the data from this study was lost in a fire.

Tables III through VI detail responses to questions that relate to citizen attitudes toward present township services. Over eighty percent consider the local services on a par or better than county services and about two-thirds of them feel local government should be strengthened. Both town and tax equalization boards are viewed as operating effectively by the majority of the respondents.

In relation to the local township board, it is interesting to note that of the 69 respondents, 30 attended their last full township meeting; this represents about 43 percent of those surveyed. In the personal survey, 74 of the 118 people surveyed indicated that they had attended their last meeting. This attendance represented 63 percent of those contacted and when combined with the mail survey, it indicates a percentage of 55 percent, or just about the number turning out nationwide for the last presidential election.

The personal survey also asked whether the resident had any contact with town board officials other than the usual meeting. One-half of the people indicated that such contact had occurred in a six-month period and concerned township business or problems. In rating local services, of the 100 who responded to the personal survey regarding the condition of township roads, fully seventy-six percent thought they were well maintained.

TABLE III

TOWNSHIP AND COUNTY SERVICES

Question: On the township level, are the services provided...

	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage
A. More adequate than county	15	22
B. On a par with county	44	63
C. Less adequate than county	8	12
D. No response	2	3
TOTAL	69	100

TABLE IV

STRENGTHEN TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT

	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage
A. Strongly agree	28	41
B. Agree	18	26
C. Not sure	10	14
D. Disagree	8	12
E. Strongly disagree	1	1
F. No response	4	6
TOTAL	69	100

TABLE V

EQUALIZATION OF TAX

Question: Has your local board of equalization distributed the tax burden fairly?

	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage
A. Fair equalization	36	52
B. Unfair equalization	11	16
C. Don't know	18	26
D. No response	4	6
TOTAL	69	100

TABLE VI

DESCRIPTION OF LOCAL TOWNSHIP BOARD

Question: Please describe your local township board...

	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage
A. Very effective	15	21
B. Generally effective	41	60
C. Not sure	7	10
D. Generally ineffective	4	6
E. Very ineffective	2	3
F. No response	0	0
TOTAL	69	100

All of the above findings lead at least to one conclusion and that is that the present-day township resident does not find his/her local governmental unit ineffective, remote, or undesirable. On grounds of efficiency or effectiveness, other commentators on township government may suggest that township government's present condition is not so desirable and that, in fact, such an outmoded unit of government should be the last one strengthened.

For example, a statement such as the following seems to have a certain ring of logic and wisdom but on closer scrutiny is very specious.

> Township governments in Minnesota receive eighteen million dollars in state and federal aids and raise only eleven million dollars by local levy. What other form of government does so little with such heavy outside assistance?

Obviously, the implication is that abolishment of the township form of government would realize great financial and administrative savings with, possibly, county or regional administration of services. This argument is heard often and takes many forms, not just the one stated above. Do townships have any clear rebuttal to such statements? What are the facts?

On average townships expend around sixty percent of their funds for road and bridge maintenance and construction. What other governmental unit has such a burden to bear and without any guaranteed specific state or federal funds to support those services provided? If townships were abolished, other units of government would have to assume that burden. Townships own and service over forty percent of the total road miles and over forty percent of all bridges in the state of Minnesota at a cost of around eighteen million dollars per year, or less than the cost of twenty miles of new interstate highway construction.

In the state and federal aids are monies that can be tied to local generation such as liquor, cigarette, and sales tax rebates and federal monies related to programs supporting agriculture (farmers do pay some federal taxes). Rural residents bear the individual cost of some services which other units spread over a larger community through federal aids. A prime example of this is the area of waste disposal. Sewer and sanitation facilities are supported by general funding which spreads the burden over the income distribution and throughout geographical areas. The federal government returns rural tax dollars not to rural but to urbanized areas for sanitation purposes while the rural resident must provide his own waste disposal system at his own expense (a unique form of double taxation).

It seems that a governmental unit with very little administrative overhead relative to service dollars delivered and a record of prompt and acceptable service delivered would not be the appropriate structure to dismantle, especially in the name of efficiency. Yet, such attitudes persist. It would only be hoped that those advocating such action would be designated to bear the added cost or diminished effectiveness of services if they become the responsibility of county or regional government and not the citizenry at large.

Another current aspect of township government which must be accepted is that no longer will rural residents sit back and calmly accept whatever fate the world (usually an outside, urbanized world) cares to hand them. In December 1972, over twelve hundred people attended the Governor's Conference on the Rural Development Act of 1972. In February, 1973, over four hundred people attended a regionalism meeting in Slayton relating to nine counties. All over

the state tax assessment meetings attract large attendance; county information meetings conducted by board members of MATO have representatives from every township in attendance.

Legal actions are being pursued aggressively by rural people in their self interest. As stated earlier, today over ninety percent of the MATO dues potential is being collected; legislation has passed abolishing the limit on dues. Rural organization for rural interests is a growing phenomenon, probably in partial response to diminished political power after the one-man one-vote rulings of the Supreme Court. Township government stands at the crossroad of a bygone age of rural apathy and a new age of rural activism. It could be the foundation upon which to begin to build a new image and new strength for rural Minnesota.

PART III: CURRENT CONCERNS

Annexation

Without a doubt, the greatest concern of township officers and residents statewide is over the issue of annexation. What is involved is a continuous piecemeal abolishment of township government rather than in one main action. The issues involved separate easily into two categories.

The first type of concern centers on the special or self interests of municipalities as related to annexation. A physical plant in a township may be sought for annexation to bring taxable property under the municipal jurisdiction. A residential area in a township may be annexed to realize a certain population criteria for financial aids or service area support for a village or city. If in fact such motivations are central to action the people living/working in the area should have some voice in the final decision. In this state presently a referendum by the people is not a required step in all annexations. Township officers feel that there should be an available mechanism for the people to override any other outside decision-making process if the people deem it advisable. The referendum would be initiated by petition.

The second and main area of concern involves the provision of services within township areas marked by increasing numbers of nonfarming or nonrural oriented families. These urban oriented residents desire a level and type of service delivery equivalent to that available in incorporated municipalities (villages and cities). It might appear most logical to encourage annexation in such cases but usually such areas also have a significant number of elderly residents not so interested in a broad range of services as are younger families with school-age children. The retired, inactive residents enjoy the more rural setting and also benefit from the lower property tax levies

usually found in townships. To bring such people into municipal jurisdiction could jeopardize financially their ability to remain in a housing situation which they prefer. This human tension is one factor that comes out in annexation considerations (in the study this came out clearly both in the case of annexation proposed by the city of Ely in the northern part of the state and by the city of Worthington in the southern part of the state).

In either case, local townships fear the loss of what they consider their own population growth and the coincident loss of highly valued real property. Certainly, this is a self interest concern but one which has the support of the people. Again the townships would welcome a rule that any annexation procedure be voted on by the people. In the previous section it was suggested that local residents view their township government and services very positively, yet in areas of higher concentration a broader spectrum of services may be desirable.

How might additional services be provided? One possible avenue could be the consolidation of two or more townships into a larger broader based service area. Table VII reveals the attitudes of the rural residents surveyed on this point. Over two-thirds of the respondents opposed the idea of consolidating into larger units.

Another alternative has been proposed by MATO. They suggest that townships be given additional power so that the townships can provide justly such services as sewage disposal, paved streets, lighted streets, curbs and gutters, and neighborhood parks. If the township could assess the costs of such improvements against those residents who benefit directly from them, it would facilitate the advancement of living conditions in many rural areas.

TABLE VII

TOWNSHIP CONSOLIDATION

Question: How would you feel about consolidation with one or more other townships in order to provide services over a larger area?

	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage
A. Strongly support	2	3
B. Support	6	9
C. Not sure	12	17
D. Oppose	20	29
E. Strongly oppose	28	41
F. No response	1	1
TOTAL	69	100

Also, in townships exceeding 1,500 people or an assessed valuation of $3,000,000 village powers might be granted, i.e., the same governmental powers allowed incorporated villages by the laws of Minnesota.

The above proposed approaches would allow the people of a more urbanized township area a workable alternative to annexation. Presently, the alternative is one of minimal services but with the increased powers, the township structure itself could generate and support the needed services, if that in fact was the will of a majority of the people.

Local Tax Assessment

April 26, 1976, a southwestern Minnesota township (from town records)...

> The board of equalization met at the house of _____ on Monday, June 28, 1875, for the purpose of equalizing the assessment of the Said Town after having made a few alterations of the list of assessment and was finely excepted by the Said Board. (emphasis the author's)

Concerns over local tax assessment have been around for a long time and will remain for a long time. Most townships have maintained a local assessment system with a local township assessor. New legislation in Minnesota has required that assessment be done by a certified assessor by 1975. Certification involves a testing procedure based upon a body of knowledge centered on academically originated and dispensed expertise and theory.

Township assessors have developed their knowledge to a great extent through experience and knowledge of local conditions. Township officers and residents view the new legislation as another attempt to abridge or eliminate township powers and activities. The state Tax Department was not prepared for the

initial massive request by townships for training seminars to prepare their local people for certification. In cooperation with the Tax Department, MATO has worked to facilitate the process of certification for local assessors.

The question of retention of local township assessors was summed up well by a township official as follows.

> A local assessor who knows the kind of soil and water problems on a farm and who knows what the farm crops will yield is the only person who can assess a farm and do a good job. He (the assessor) has usually lived in the township for many years and knows the township very well. Most of the farmers I know want nothing to do with a state or county appointed assessor.

Table VIII illustrates how a large majority of the residents support the idea of local assessment. In the urgency felt by rural people, this problem of local assessment ranks second only to that surrounding annexation.

Local Initiative

Fundamentally, rural township residents remain very concerned about the preservation of local initiative. What they perceive often is a monstrous outside force or power which, if not watched or controlled, will take away from them the fruits of years of very long and hard labor. This attitude is real and deeply imbedded within rural culture. Professor George Donahue (rural sociologist, University of Minnesota) and others have commented on the strongly isolationist and somewhat paranoid attitudes existing in rural culture. What they may not recognize is the actual behavior of outside groups which only go to substantiate and solidify the stereotypes held by many rural people. A recent example is the furor over the proposed Minnesota Experimental City. Admittedly, in the area of the final site selection there

TABLE VIII

TOWNSHIP ASSESSOR

Question: Do you favor maintaining your local township assessor (if you have one)?

	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage
Yes	61	89
No	2	3
No response	6	8
TOTAL	69	100

are definite proponents as well as opponents. The essence of opposition, however, is as much due to the lack of local involvement as over the basic idea.

Rural people have an awareness of economic problems, environmental problems, and other human problems but they also have a stake in their own lives. What would their reaction logically be to the following quote from the wrap-around section of "Harper's", March 1973.

> The community (experimental city) would be economically viable as a unit of the U.S. economy, truly experimental, at least 100 miles from any major existing urban center--a densely populated center surrounded by open land. This surrounding land, which would have an area perhaps used for forests, outdoor museums, recreation, or agriculture, or just left as a rural area.
>
> The idea will be to populate the experimental city in the shortest possible time by attracting people from the overcrowded urban complexes, in contrast to the past practice of letting the city slowly grow by drawing people from the immediately surrounding region. We must get away from what Buckminister Fuller calls the "local focus" situation, wherein the city relates itself specifically to the needs, resources, and desires of people in its immediate vicinity.
>
> Athelstan Spelhaus
> an originator of the Minnesota
> Experimental City idea

Local paranoia in such a situation might seem to be a mild reaction; maybe not to the ultimate intent or result of such ideas but to the seemingly complete discounting of what existing residents might in fact desire out of their lives!

Highways may bring benefits but they also may cut off a section of a farm and make access difficult or impossible. Expanded state park and recreation areas may be advisable but how do townships replace the tax revenues lost in the process? Hiking and bicycle trails along rivers offer worthwhile exercise and recreation but what about cattle that need a drink or need to cross a

river in order to find grass on the other side? Canoeing can be invigorating and even romantic but an unfenced river that lets cattle roam unrestricted can be economically disastrous. There are local issues involved, local interests involved in many areas of new land-use proposals. Local people ask that their concerns be heard, that local forums be established, that local input be guaranteed so that constructive rather than obstructionist attitudes can be nurtured. Programs should initiate at the local level dealing fundamentally with local consequences and then take on broader considerations--that is the attitude of much of rural society.

Environmental (anti-pollution) and safety regulations have a place in our society today but may not be rational if their main outcome is to force more people to leave farming when larger commercial or corporate operations do not diminish pollution or safety hazards.

Does local initiative become meaningless due to lack of interest by township residents? Thirty people who were surveyed by mail indicated that they attended their last township meeting while seventy-four of those surveyed personally indicated attendance. On a combined basis, fifty-five percent attended as outlined earlier.

Rural Service Delivery Systems

Recently, an administrator of Southwest Minnesota State College quoted some population statistics at a regionalization information conference. Population in the nine-county area of the proposed Region 8 is about 141,000. By the year 2000, it is projected to be about 103,000. When such figures are

presented, it would seem to be a form of suicide for a newly graduated medical doctor or dentist to establish a practice in the nine-county area with the hope of seeing it grow over the years. This is one area where service delivery to rural areas has become critical.

Another area, usually less obvious, is in regard to police and fire protection. As the rural areas become more depopulated and as local governmental units find it next to impossible to provide such services on their own, the services are often contracted out to nearby municipalities. But today in many areas of Minnesota, nearby has come to mean anywhere from twenty to thirty miles. Especially in the case of fire protection, this kind of situation amounts to no protection at all. The Council in Fire Service Education and Research has published monographs suggesting that possibly one-third of Minnesota's rural residents do not have adequate fire protection available to them. Much the same case could be made in regard to police protection and in a time of high meat prices, many farmers have valuable property to protect.

The usual answers provided for these problems lie in two possible directions. Services can be centralized in one location and people required to travel to benefit from them (or as with fire protection, the service delivery would have to travel to its point of need). This puts a burden on the receiver of the service, a burden which under severe weather conditions can be costly as well as risky.

Alternatively, the services could be decentralized according to the most extreme need and in a smaller more compact form. This can be visualized in terms of small, mobile fire-fighting equipment. Also, it might involve some new category of emergency medical aid in residence locally to handle routine

and emergency cases; more serious medical problems could be forwarded to a centralized clinic. In the past few years such new careers and new systems have been widely discussed but rarely implemented. The health and safety of rural society may depend on such implementation.

Alternative Revenue Sources

Everyone is currently experiencing the reality of rapidly rising costs for materials and services. Townships are not an exception to this rule. As pointed out, they have responsibility for the maintenance of over forty percent of the state's roads and bridges. To do an adequate job without unduly burdening property owners (who provide at their own cost many services provided in urban areas by governments) new sources of receipts are needed.

Gasoline tax funds going to counties may but need not be shared with townships for road and bridge maintenance. In many cases, general levy funds must be used. In the case of major renovation, costs can run to five figures, an amount beyond the resources of most townships.

Revenue sharing is now a reality and, supposedly, had an intent to provide funds to realize locally some human service systems to be cut at the federal administration level, for example, Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) programs. Yet, when a lump sum of money comes into a township it is only natural for it to be used for bridge or road repair. Probably the most basic rural need is for an adequate transportation system. If townships could share in the gas tax and other road supporting programs, revenue sharing funds might, at the township's basic local level, be allocated to supporting human service systems other than transportation.

It seems self evident that in this age in order for rural life to be livable local transportation needs to be supported. Townships without a lot of outside support have been maintaining a vast road system with some economy and adequacy. To be able to continue, new sources of revenue are needed.

Statewide Organization Activities

One critical concern for all rural people when dealing with problems is that of organization. Due to geographical and, at times, cultural distances in rural areas, organization for united action can be unimaginably difficult. Si Kahn in a book How People Get Power develops this point in relation to rural situations in the South. It applies as well in Minnesota.

A concerned citizen in the Twin Cities may have to take thirty minutes to drive to attend a meeting of interest to him. It has been my experience that meetings I have attended in southwest Minnesota, in northwest Minnesota, and in the Twin Cities have all drawn interested participants from one hundred to as far as three hundred miles away. In one way this is a concern and in another it is a good indication of the concern generated over rural problems.

To facilitate the organized pursuit of rural interests, on an ever increasing basis rural people have come together. The section on the history of township government pointed out the amazing growth and committment of the statewide township officers association, MATO. To be effective, such an organization needs the legal and financial resources to pursue aggressively the interests of its constituents wherever such confrontations may lead.

The state association has asked for and received legislation to eliminate the limit on the dues that individual townships can pay to outside organizations and to double the limit for townships to pay in legal fees. These measures go part way in giving one organization the resource base necessary to accomplish its goals. It may be well to realize that no other form of government in the state was operating under similar limitations.

PART IV: REGIONALISM

(Planning for the Future)

One of the most frequent statements about township government is that it no longer serves any function or purpose. In an age of emerging regional units, intra-state and inter-state, the continued existence of a very small unit of government is called into question. In fact, the irony is this--the development of regionalism may have given townships their major justification.

Whether impowered or only advisory, any unit of government should be an instrument of the will of the people. Sometimes government must act as a guiding hand which leads down new and upsetting paths and it must channel, redirect, and pattern processes of change initiated by other social spheres. In any case,the real, believed, or felt needs of the people should be taken into consideration and the only way for this to happen is for these needs to be communicated throughout the many levels of government.

In any communication system, there must be a beginning point and an ending point. The fundamental orientation of the system in the minds of those involved is absolutely critical. Too often in the present governmental systems in the United States today, the officials and bureaucrats seem to perceive the process as beginning with them and ending with the people. As intimated above, this is not necessarily a problem when issues of general scope and urgent consequence are involved. The natural inertia of people must be overcome in order for things to change or to move in a new direction.

But who defines whether a change is for the better or whether a change in direction will bring a fresh breeze or a foul one? In the process, a perspective that emerges and initiates from the people is needed; this one

properly ends with officials and bureaucrats. How can such communication come about? Does it happen presently? In general I believe definitely that such communication seldom occurs. Why? People have a deep sense of who they are--or more specifically, what they perceive themselves to be. They may be farmers, housewives, small businessmen, rural mail carriers, or elementary school teachers. They don't perceive themselves as experts on rural problems, yet, they really are. They are the ones who experience problems daily. Therefore, a forum is needed where ideas, grievances, and suggestions can surface and be transmitted to levels where they can be effectively dealt with.

The township form of government provides, theoretically, just such a forum. In urban areas, a neighborhood form of organization provides an analogous image to rural townships. I chose the neighborhood image because it evokes a personalistic feeling that is true of township behavior. In the course of the study on township government, people mentioned their ability to deal with problems and questions on a personal basis with township officials. The feeling of personal knowledge and availability of those who have power over us is not common anymore. Should we do away with one place where it does exist?

More specifically, how might the township form of government fit into a Minnesota with regional commissions? Two models of a possible communications structure involving townships and a regional commission are outlined below. They assume the present requirement of one township official from each county in a region as being on the commission. Also, assumed are an active and functioning county unit of township officials and a county board of commissioners.

FIRST MODEL (two yearly meetings)

	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.
Regional Board				x						x			
County Commissioners			x		x				x		x		
County Unit		x				x		x				x	
Township Meeting	x						x						x

SECOND MODEL (three yearly meetings)

	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.
Regional Board			x				x				x		
County Commissioners		x		x		x		x		x		x	
County Unit		x		x		x		x		x		x	
Township Meeting	x				x				x				x

The foundation for each model is the meeting and discussion of local township residents.

The models are a simple ladder type two-way communication model which is benefited by the presence on the regional commission of township and county representatives who can express views from their differing viewpoints. Also, it can be seen that the township meetings have a central role in the process and its effectiveness as do the regional commission meetings.

As Table IX indicates, it is plain that town officials in southwestern Minnesota are opposed to the establishment of regional commissions, but the people seem more unsure and have less overall opposition. On February 19, 1973, an informational meeting on the proposed formation of Region 8 was held in Slayton. The town residents and officials in attendance seemed concerned with two basic issues. The first concern was the continuation of the township form of government and the second was the retention of as much local autonomy as possible.

The models suggested above imply the continued existence of township government and they provide guarantees of active participation in decision making. This is a definite retention of local autonomy, or the opportunity for it, depending on the activity and concern of local people themselves.

TABLE IX

REGIONAL COMMISSIONS

Question: Do you support the establishment of regional commissions?

	Town Officials		Town Residents	
	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage	Number Responding	Approximate Percentage
Strongly Support	0	0	2	3
Support	2	10	7	10
Not sure	3	15	27	40
Oppose	8	37.5	14	20
Strongly Oppose	8	37.5	14	20
No Response	0	0	5	7
TOTAL	21	100	69	100

PART V: AN ALTERNATE FUTURE

A leading economist/sociologist, Kenneth Boulding, once wrote a book about images--the images that we all live by. However unclear it may be, each of us has a picture of the future in our minds. We travel into this poorly formed future when someone gives us a more definite picture than we have perceived ourselves but one which conforms to our unconscious feelings about it. A sort of cultural self-fulfilling prophecy works in this way to channel developments down certain limited avenues; the fewer the number of images, the more inevitable the outcome. The future images for rural society available today are limited.

One image is that of the individual family farm. It relates to a past that may have existed but no longer fits in a society of high technology, extensive, commercial farming whether conducted by a corporate structure or by an individual family or family group. This family farm image is being transformed into a mechanical corporate farming image and is linked to the food needs of ever increasing numbers of urban dwellers. I believe we are all familiar with this image and while we may have nostalgia for the former, we tend to accept the latter with a certain twinge of fatalism.

Is there any alternative? Yes, one does exist and, in fact, in isolated pockets is being tried with mixed success. Back-to-the-land homesteading may sound like an even more absurd, nostalgic image than the quarter section family farm. It doesn't have to be so absurd. An earlier commercial farm operation was definitely linked to a level of technology that implied low mechanical power and high animal and human input. With the advance of agricultural technology and efficiency, less and less human input per acre

is necessary to realize increasing levels of output. The new image possible now is a new combination of high technology and intensive labor input. Why?

Two major reasons for this new image of family homesteading emerge. The first is simply that many people seem to want to live such a life style for their own sake and for the growth and experience of their children. Second, it is apparent today that unemployment and underemployment for professionally trained people and urban-based people is a reality. An alternatively creative use of the energies of such people would be involvement in the so-called rural renaissance.

Where do townships fit into this picture of small (40-80 acre) intensively farmed homesteads? Local government would be the channel for creation of active involvement in the community, the revitalizing focus for rural people. New kinds of expertise, new kinds of input could build a viable and human way of life in rural areas. Like any image, it will not become reality unless we realistically and consciously build programs to support it. An image of nationwide four-lane expressways took thirty years and billions of dollars to realize and so would a system of small, individual family-type farms. It is something for all of us to consider.

CONCLUSION

Rather than try to draw any conclusions for the reader, I suggest that each one of us needs to come to some decision about the basic condition of the world around us. What is fundamental? How are people to live and work and truly remain self-productive, socially productive, and humanly productive? Does the rural resident, township officer, or state official concerned about the future of township government have a valid concern? That answer must be your answer because this report has been written to raise questions in the mind of the reader, not to answer them. The report does reflect the attitudes of people who are closest to township government--township residents and township officials.

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